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AMEMBASSY NICOSIA PRIORITY
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S E C R E T STATE 231029

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2

TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SUBJECT: INTSUM 647 - SEPTEMBER 12, 1978

LONDON FOR GLASPIE
PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY
OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

1. SYRIA. INDICATIONS ARE GROWING THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD IS SERIOUSLY ILL, POSSIBLY WITH LEUKEMIA. ALTHOUGH THE NATURE OF HIS ALLEGED AILMENT CAN NOT NOW BE CONFIRMED, THE ANTICIPATION OF ASSAD'S DEMISE, WHICH HAS BEEN RUMORED FOR SOME MONTHS, HAS STIMULATED A GREAT DEAL OF REFLECTION AMONG SYRIANS BELOW THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL ABOUT THE POST-ASSAD PERIOD. ACCORDING TO OUR EMBASSY, DAMASCENES ASSUME THAT RIFAAT ASSAD WILL PLAY A KEY ROLE IN SELECTING A SUCCESSOR TO HIS BROTHER. MANY SYRIANS,
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FURTHERMORE, WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF A POPULAR SUNNI LEADER, SUCH AS DEFENSE MINISTER TLAS, WERE CHOSEN AS A FIGUREHEAD, WITH RIFAAT PULLING THE STRINGS BEHIND THE SCENES.

2. IN VIEW OF THE SECTARIAN STRAINS WITHIN SYRIA REFLECTED IN CONTINUING ASSASSINATIONS OF ALAWITES, TWO VERY BASIC

JUDGMENTS SEEM APPROPRIATE: DESPITE RESPECT FOR ASSAD'S LEADERSHIP ABILITIES, THE MAJORITY SUNNI COMMUNITY PROBABLY SHARES A CONSENSUS THAT ASSAD SHOULD BE THE LAST ALAWITE PRESIDENT OF SYRIA; AND THE ABILITY OF THE ALAWITE MINORITY TO MAINTAIN ITS DOMINANCE WILL DEPEND ON ITS SUCCESS IN SUBORDINATING FACTIONAL TENDENCIES TO THE COMMUNITY'S LARGER INTERESTS.

3. THE PROSPECTS FOR A CONTINUATION OF SYRIAN POLICY TOWARD LEBANON AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD ARE GENERALLY FAVORABLE. FOR EXAMPLE, THE PARTICIPANTS IN CHOOSING ASSAD'S SUCCESSOR HAVE PARTICIPATED IN POLICY FORMULATION AND THUS HAVE A LARGE STAKE IN CONSERVING HIS LEGACY. THEN, TOO, AS EMBASSY DAMASCUS SPECULATES, IF ASSAD HAS SEVERAL MONTHS IN WHICH TO PREPARE FOR HIS DEPARTURE, HE MAY TRY TO

RESOLVE HIS LEBANESE DILEMMA QUICKLY RATHER THAN ENTRUST IT TO HIS SUCCESSORS. MOREOVER, IF AN ASPIRANT TO SUCCEED ASSAD CAN DEMONSTRATE EXPERTISE, FIRMNESS, AND BALANCE IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS, HIS CREDENTIALS WILL BE ENHANCED.

4. IN SUM, THE SHIFT FROM ASSAD TO A NEW LEADER IS LIKELY TO PRODUCE INCREMENTAL RATHER THAN REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES ON KEY POLICY ISSUES. THE PRESSURES TOWARD CONSOLIDATION OF POWER DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD WILL PROBABLY FREEZE NEW POLICY INITIATIVES FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. EIGHT YEARS OF RELATIVE
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STABILITY UNDER ASSAD HAVE GIVEN THE SYRIANS AN INCENTIVE FOR MAINTAINING AN ORDERLY TRANSITION PROCESS. THEIR PRIDE IN STABILITY IN A COUNTRY LONG CONSIDERED UNGOVERNABLE WILL TEND TO INDUCE CAUTION IN THE DIFFICULT DAYS AHEAD. (SECRET)

5. EGYPT. SINCE SEPTEMBER 1977 WHEN THE RIFT VALLEY FEVER OUTBREAK OCCURRED IN THE NILE DELTA, AN ESTIMATED 20 THOUSAND PEOPLE HAVE BEEN INFECTED AND APPROXIMATELY 80 HAVE DIED. THE MOST SERIOUS COMPLICATION RESULTING FROM THIS VIRAL DISEASE HAVE BEEN ENCEPHALITIS, MACULAR DEGENERATION AND TEMPORARY OR PERMANENT BLINDNESS. RECENT FINDINGS BY THE EGYPTIAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH HAVE INDICATED THAT THE DISEASE WAS FIRST PRESENT IN DOMESTIC ANIMALS WHICH APPEAR TO BE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO INFECTION THAN HUMANS. BASED UPON RIFT VALLEY FEVER ANTIBODIES FOUND IN ANIMAL SERA, THE DISEASE PROBABLY FIRST ARRIVED IN EGYPT SOMETIME DURING THE SPRING OF 1977. ANIMALS

INFECTED THUS FAR HAVE BEEN SHEEP, BUFFALO, CATTLE, HORSES AND CAMELS. GOATS APPARENTLY HAVE A HIGH DEGREE OF RESISTENCE TO THIS DISEASE.

6. THE DISEASE IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN BROUGHT INTO EGYPT FROM THE SUDAN BY CAMELS INTENDED FOR SLAUGHTER. ALTHOUGH NOT YET CONFIRMED, IT IS ALSO BELIEVED THAT MOSQUITOES INFECTED THE CAMELS AND THAT THE DISEASE WAS ACTUALLY SPREAD BY NATURAL AEROSOLS CARRYING THE BLOOD OF SLAUGHTERED CAMELS. THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH IS PLANNING A COUNTRY-WIDE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THIS DISEASE WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, THE EGYPTIAN ORGANIZATION FOR BIOLOGICAL AND VACCINE PRODUCTION, AND AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY. KILLED RIFT VALLEY
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FEVER VIRUS VACCINES WILL BE PREPARED AND MADE AVAILABLE
FOR BOTH THE HUMAN AND ANIMAL POPULATIONS.

(CONFIDENTIAL) CHRISTOPHER

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